

Rattlesnake Ridge

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Abstract

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Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ahbra'.

Ahbra Williams
August 5, 2009

Rattlesnake Ridge

The sun was barely breaking through the clouds when we climbed into my mom's forest green minivan and started on our way to Rattlesnake Ridge. My mom and I drove in silence toward North Bend, a small town forty minutes east of Seattle, the closest hint of civilization before the wilderness of the mountains we hike as a yearly tradition. My face was turned towards the passenger seat window, examining the tall evergreens as they whizzed past me in a green blur. There was a light drizzle coming from the thick mist hovering low around the trees, typical of Seattle mornings. My mom kept flipping the windshield wipers on and off, having trouble dealing with the fickle weather. I sipped my homemade latte quietly while I thought of how many morns asked for a yearly hike for their Mother's Day. Every year, without fail, my mom asked for my family to join her on a hike rather than receive a typical gift, like flowers, chocolates or cards. All my friends' moms were still sleeping and looking forward to a spa day while I sat in the minivan, still cold despite the heat turned up full blast and dreaded the climb up Rattlesnake Ridge.

This trip was just the two of us. My entire family used to go on these hikes, but slowly the numbers have dwindled. We would pack lunches of banana and peanut butter sandwiches for us kids, and my parents would have ham and cheese sandwiches. We would spend all day on the mountain, stopping for swims along the way in the freezing alpine lakes that shouldered the trails and tripling the average length of the hike because of the frequent stops. My brother and sister have not been able to make the annual hike for the last couple of years because of school, and my father has also started coming less

and less. He claims he has to put in a few hours at work, but I know he simply doesn't like hiking that much. Usually we find him playing pinochle with his aging crew of boys when we come back from our hikes. An ornate display of colorful flowers from Flowers.com sits on the kitchen table with a dinky printed off card hanging from one of the stalks, as if that will somehow absolve my Dad. For a while, it has just been my mom and me.

We passed through North Bend as stores were just starting to flip their signs from CLOSED to OPEN. Even though North Bend is only forty miles east of Seattle, it feels much more wild, maybe because it is the last town before the Cascade Mountain Pass; a chain of mountains that separates the western side of the state from the sparsely populated eastern side of Washington. We stopped at a little restaurant called The Cottage Cafe right on the edge of the town. The decor was a mixture of fifties diner style with jukeboxes and Coca-Cola paraphernalia juxtaposed with hunting items like stuffed pheasants and deer heads hanging from the walls. Still early, we ordered coffee. I tried my luck with the waitress to get another latte, but she just shot me a quizzical look, while my mom chuckled a little to herself. Black coffee it is. My mom gingerly asked questions about school that year, careful not to probe too much. I gave answers, revealing little. The last time I had been home was the previous Christmas break and I had barely been there for a week, most of that time spent reconnecting with friends from high school or sleeping. This routine of question and answer is well rehearsed and obligatory for my mom and me when I come home. I doubt she really listens to my bland, base answers, but we perform this act anyways.

After only a half hour or so, my mom laid a fistful of bills on the table and we headed back to the van. My mom, as a rule, always leaves more than twenty percent for waitresses; I think it's because she used to be a waitress all through college at a Holiday Inn in Kansas, where she grew up. She spent most of her weekends working the graveyard shift, paying her way through school. She always says it is hard work being a waitress, I wouldn't know.

Right outside of North Bend we saw the turn off of Interstate 90 to Rattlesnake Ridge. We pulled up to the park entrance, and were pleased to see only two other cars in the small parking lot. Usually Rattlesnake Ridge is a popular hiking spot, with families littering the trails, dogs barking and children's screams piercing the sky. My mom chose to leave early in the morning to avoid the crowds, even though I doubt there would be many people scaling mountains on Mother's Day. Even so, Rattlesnake was uncommonly deserted, probably as a result of the death of a young man in his 20s on the ridge a week prior to our hike. The story was splashed all over the papers, which described his 400-foot fall from the top of the ledge. He was the first person ever recorded to die on this relatively tame hike. There is nothing like a senseless death to scare people from coming to Rattlesnake, and truthfully, I appreciated the resulting peaceful ambiance.

The view from the parking lot of Rattlesnake was pretty dull with a dingy, abandoned information kiosk and overflowing trash bins finally planted on either side of the trailhead like big, dirty sentinels guarding the mountain. A long forgotten sign weathered by constant rain and snow outlines the hiking path that winds up the peak, but the words are faded and almost illegible. Rattlesnake itself is not one of the most

spectacular mountains in the Northwest like Rainier or St. Helens; it is pretty nondescript in the chain of peaks that cut through the state. Huge gouges of landscape are cut out of the southern part of the mountain, an area owned by Weyerhaeuser for logging operations. The holes in the vegetation look like craters in the mountain, brown clumps in a sea of green, and are visible for miles away. This section, along with the northern side owned by Seattle Water Department is cordoned off from the public so hikers can pretend they are on pristine trails and untainted mountains.

Even though Rattlesnake was a beat up hill compared to other surrounding mountains, I found myself happy to finally see a mountain. After being in Ann Arbor for eight months, it was nice to see any sort of elevation outside rather than long stretches of frozen over ground; the tallest thing I can see when I walk to class is an apartment building. I forget how much I miss the Pacific Northwest landscape until I leave it. That is probably a product of being raised there, I take it for granted but my mom never does. She knows what flat is like, being from Kansas, and every day when she sees Mount Rainier from our kitchen, she is thankful.

We emerged from the car and start up the trail, my mom leading the way. She was carrying a high tech backpack, lightweight pants that could convert into shorts, one of those long-sleeved moisture-wicking shirts, waterproof hiking boots, and a hiking pole. If there was one thing my mom was, it was prepared. For her birthday she always asks for the newest hiking gear, and over the years she has accumulated quite a lot. She tried to get into kayaking and snowshoeing, but neither of those activities lasted long. I think this was because she can't safely do these activities alone. She used to have some buddies that she would kayak or snowshoe with in a sort of outdoorsy female group, but

she quickly tired of them when they would cut days short to go to Starbucks. She likes to hike alone usually, and I don't blame her; I like my alone time too.

The hike to Rattlesnake Ridge is only a couple miles long with tame, looping switchbacks that zigzag back and forth up to the peak of the mountain. Only taking a couple hours, the hike itself is fairly easy, with cleared trails to follow and little vertical climb. I think my mom chooses Rattlesnake Ridge each year for my sake. I am not an avid hiker; I would prefer to run on flat ground for a half an hour instead of climbing up a mountain all day. Sometimes if she hikes up and down a mountain faster than expected, she'll turn around and do it again, leaving the family clueless as to where she is. I remember the days she would be gone all day and come back far past dinnertime, never bringing a cell phone with her. My dad nonchalantly suggests she go with a buddy after these mountainous rendezvous, but she never does.

After about half an hour of going back and forth on the switchbacks up the mountain, we decided to stop for a water break. Sitting on a pair of boulders on the side of the trail, we passed her fancy metal water bottle back and forth while I panted lightly. An army of squirrels tamed by the constant attention of animal-loving hikers descended upon us, and my mom produced a bag of trail mix from somewhere in her pack and started scattering the nuts and-raisinsover the pathway. She kept the chocolate M&Ms for herself, popping a few in her mouth between swigs from the water bottle.

Feeling a little warm from the hike, I peeled off my sweatshirt and tied it around my waist as I looked down and noticed her rubbing her knee. She would never admit to it, but I think it was bothering her. When she was ten years old she fell off the top of a slide at a public pool and years later realized she nearly tore her kneecap off in that one

incident. She was a marathon runner and tennis player, but had to quit all that for fear of a knee replacement. I can't imagine that hiking is good for her knee either, but I suppose you have to keep some things that you love. I craned my neck around to inspect the scenery. The dense Douglas Firs lining the trail stood straight up like tall green soldiers, and the needles covered the ground as well, creating an entire spectrum of green as far as I could see into the grown tree stands.

The day was still overcast, but not too cold or hot. One nice thing about Seattle weather is that you can tell the temperature from the sky, when it is sunny it is hot and when it is overcast it is cold. In Michigan, it could be twenty degrees and sunny or incredibly muggy and overcast. After two years of going to school in Ann Arbor, I still don't know how to equip myself for warm, humid rain that lingers in the falls and springs. I'm not sure if anyone knows what to wear in those downpours. On the trail, the sprinkles of rain were light enough to not need a jacket, and felt nice and cool on my face, like rain should feel. The evergreens were clumped so closely together it was hard to see through the thick masses off the trail. In Michigan, even the tallest trees are not tall compared to the trees of the Pacific Northwest.

As we started back up the trail my mom broke the silence of our trip by calling back to me saying, "Uncle Tom would have loved this." It is true, he probably would have. Uncle Tom was my mom's younger brother, her favorite of the four she had. Tom was quite the outdoorsman. He lived in Georgia and would show me around the swamps when I would go down and visit his family. He never made it up to visit us in Seattle; he died of a heart attack in his tool shed at the age of 41. He didn't have high blood pressure, exercised regularly, and maintained a good diet. Just a little flake of plaque

came off and that was enough to stop his heart from pumping. For a couple months after the funeral, she was more like a shell of a person than a real person. I think that was the first time I had ever seen my mom cry, and I hope to never see it again. She wordlessly gestured at an eagle's nest high up in one of the trees next to the trail with her shiny hiking pole, signaling that talk of Tom was over before I even could voice my agreement. I was glad that out here my mom could mention Tom without jutting her mouth into a straight line and looking away, her typical response to hearing his name. I half jogged to catch and closed the space between us.

After slowly coiling up the mountain for a while and still no sign of another hiker, we reached the first mile marker. I noticed that my mom was walking at a slower clip than usual. Most times we hike together I have to take two strides to her one, even though I am two inches taller than her. She used to twirl around in a circle at each elbow of the switchback, just to rub in the fact that the hike was easier for her while I would be dawdling behind wiping sweat from my brow. *Maybe she is tired from work*, I thought to myself. My mom had recently returned to work from a prolonged stay as an at-home accountant. I never really knew what that meant, considering she was not a public accountant and just dealt with our finances while spending most of her days on trails, but I assumed it was a lot like a stay-at-home-mother without the cooking or cleaning responsibilities. A couple months before the hike, she started working at a property investing firm as an accounting consultant working more than eight hours a day, five days a week. She hated the work, she told me, but sending three children to out of state colleges is no easy feat. For the past week, she would leave early in the morning and come home around seven too tired to cook dinner and immediately go to bed. This was a

woman, who had never worn anything but sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers, and now she was waking up early to coordinate pantsuits and swipe some mascara on her eyeJashes. She slumped down on the couch after work in those clothes every night, and it might be the most depressing thing I have ever seen. How a woman who lived in Alaska for fifteen years hunting for food and killing bears ended up a consulting accountant, I don't know. She seems more like a wild animal or an outdoors cat; maybe she was just not made to be domesticated and wear beige suits Monday through Friday.

After the second mile marker, the trail flattened out and the dense forest that shouldered the path disappeared and made way for large boulders interspersed with smaller trees and shrubs. We were almost at the ledge. My mom seemed excited and picked up her pace as we entered the clearing and looked around. Surrounding us were other peaks mostly higher than Rattlesnake covered with a thick mat of evergreens and channels etched through with faint hints of alpine springs. In the distance I could make out the powdery white cliffs of Mount Rainier sitting regally to our south. The snow dots Rainier, along with other taller peaks year round, and served as the only contrast against the ubiquitous green of the smaller peaks. We walked further out towards the ledge taking more care than usual, the recent fall of the young man still fresh in our minds. The boulders at Rattlesnake were gigantic; they looked out of place against the bristly green landscape surrounding the ledge. The ledge looked almost like a balding man without out the typical emerald cloak the rest of the peak blanketed itself with. I peeked down in between the boulders and saw the deep chasm that seemed to drop all the way to the ground. It was easy to see how someone could tumble down the rocky face with just one, small misstep. Once we had carefully scaled out to the farthest rock, my mom and I sat

down, our feet dangling over the edge. Rattlesnake Lake below was previously hidden on the western side of the mountain, but opened up hundreds of feet below us. The water glistened a clear blue under our feet, and I wanted to swan dive from the top of the ledge down to the clear waters after the climb. Maybe falling down like that hiker had done the week before was not such a bad way to go after all, seeing the glittering sapphire waters as a last image.

My mom and I sat on the rock in silence, enjoying the little sunshine that had finally broken through the thick covering of gray clouds. We passed her water bottle back and forth again, and I looked over at her face, studying it for longer than a comfortable second. She had a placid look, almost like she was finally at a place where she felt comfortable. I suddenly felt an intense urge to say something to her. I felt the words bubbling up my throat; I wanted her to know that I appreciated her working so hard at a job she hated for my education, I wanted to tell her that it was okay we didn't say everything to each other, I wanted to tell her I care. At the last minute, when I thought the words were going to spill out of my mouth, I swallowed hard and bit them back. Maybe too much time had passed for my empty words to change anything; maybe it just wasn't worth it. For a few more moments we sat and took all the scenery in, and after a while, my mother suggested we start heading back down the trail to the car. She didn't want me to have to waste my whole day out hiking when I could be doing something fun with friends. I quietly tried to protest, but I just held my tongue. I took one last look out over Rattlesnake Ridge and hoped that maybe my mom and I didn't need to talk things over. I hoped that I didn't need to say all those things for her to know them. Regardless of what I said or didn't say, I thought that our yearly reunions on

Rattlesnake meant something. The annual pilgrimage I made for my mother teetering to the ledge looking over the plummeting abyss was a testament of our bond together. I know this feeble gesture isn't the same, but maybe, hopefully, it's enough.